

The Hand of Buddha

Story of an Ivory Box and What It Contained.

By CLARISSA MACKIE

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When John Lawrence was in China he sent me, among other curios, a quaint little box of carved ivory. It was a beautiful specimen of the carver's art—an airy fabric of delicately wrought flowers, queer birds and impossible fishes. If the box really had an opening the fastening was so artfully concealed that I could not find it.

One night some months later, on returning home from the theater, I found my studio brilliantly lighted and Lawrence occupying a big chair before the smoldering fire.

"I returned today," he said in reply to my delighted greeting. "Been waiting here since 9 o'clock for you. Your man said you had gone to the theater."

"Yes," I replied, donning a dilapidated smoking coat. "I have been to see 'Nanette' and incidentally saw Miss Farnham."

"We are to be married in May," he said without turning his head.

I swallowed my astonishment, for I had not known they were engaged and, in fact, was deeply interested in pretty Miss Farnham myself. In spite of my chagrin I managed to congratulate him warmly, and joining him before the now replenished fire.

"Where is that ivory box I sent you, Dick?"

"Surprised and somewhat embarrassed, I made no reply, but went to the cupboard and brought the heavy little box to the table."

"What the deuce is the matter with you?" he asked sharply as the box struck the table with a hollow, empty sound.

"Just what I want to know," I replied crossly.

He stretched out his hand for the box and tried to raise it from the table, and then, as if surprised at its resistance, he arose and lifted it with both hands, looking at me queerly. As he dropped the box and we heard the hollow rattle as it struck the table we both laughed nervously and resumed our seats, he staring into the fire with wide open, startled eyes. Presently he spoke:

"That box was given to me by a wealthy Chinaman whom I have good reason to believe hated me intensely—perhaps with reason. It was such a dainty bit of carving that I could not resist accepting it. In fact, I really could not do otherwise without infringing their elaborate social laws. When he gave it to me old Van Ping told me of another pretty bit of carving, owned by his brother, a Chefu merchant. He gave me a strip of red paper covered with hieroglyphics and told me that on presenting it to his brother, the merchant, I could obtain the cherished curio. I went to my room in Parkerson's bungalow—you know I was staying with Parkerson—and placed the box before me on the table. It did not weigh more than a few ounces. A moment later my China boy entered and uttered a cry of fear when he saw the box, which he seemed to recognize. He threw himself upon his knees and begged me to take the box away; that it was accursed and that all luck would fall upon me and all my house if I harbored it a moment. When I laughed at him and told him about the ivory hand that had been promised to me I thought he would go out of his mind. He pleaded that I would at least send the box to America before going down to Chefu after the other curio. Perhaps I was a little impressed by his actions; but, anyway, my curiosity was aroused, and so I agreed, and he happily packed the little box among your case of goods and watched with great satisfaction while the coolies rolled the case into the hold of the ship. The day after that I went down to Chefu and secured the 'hand of Buddha,' as the old man called it. He was a sly old beggar and up to some deviltry, I was positive, though not a muscle of his oily, yellow countenance moved when I presented my letter. The hand I have brought home with me, and, in spite of my China boy's warning that I would suffer unimaginable ill fortune if I ever brought the two objects, the hand and the box, together, it is my intention to do that very thing tonight. The hand is packed in my bag, and I want you to come around to my rooms now and bring the box, and we will find what in the devil that old rascal was up to if it wasn't all bosh."

I assented reluctantly enough, for I was rather bored by the mysterious box and just a bit down in the mouth about the news of his engagement. "Now that you have consented," he said coolly, "I'll read you the letter which Van Ping sent to his brother. Of course these chaps exercise a lot of hocus pocus in all their affairs, and I was somewhat amused at the idea of their evident desire to work me up into a fright. After the old merchant had read the letter I had it translated. It seemed to throw the translator into a spasm as he read it." He drew from a letter case a thin strip of red paper and slowly read: "Give to the accursed American the hand of Buddha. He has the sacred box. The serpent grows rapidly."

The clocks were striking 2 as we left my studio and made our way

through the deserted streets to Lawrence's rooms. The unusual events of the evening had combined to unsettle my nerves, and it was with a vague feeling of dread that I accompanied him on what seemed a fool's errand. Yet there was a decidedly uncomfortable feeling that I could not suppress. Twice I looked behind me quickly, and twice I saw nothing but the long, sharp shadows cast by the electric lights. Lawrence seemed unconscious of my mental excitement, for he strode quietly by my side with bent head and hands in his pockets. It was a relief to get into the warmly lighted vestibule, for there I no longer heard the imaginary soft pad-pad of feet behind us. I had carried the box in a hand bag, and its weight was such that I was glad to turn it over to my host, who excused himself and disappeared into the smoking room. Presently he returned.

I saw that something was on his mind.

"See here, Dick," he began seriously, "Grace—Miss Farnham—is not aware of my return. If I should be taken ill or anything she must not know the circumstances. Give her this letter, which will explain enough. If nothing happens forget it all like the good fellow you are." And as he clasped my hand and looked into my eyes I knew that he had guessed my secret.

"Now for the hand of Buddha," he cried, with a laugh, and together we entered the handsome smoking room. It was a large room, crowded with treasures from every quarter of the globe. In the middle of the room stood a small ebony table, the top inlaid with squares of ivory like a checker-board. On it stood the hand of Buddha. It was the size of an infant's hand and carved from a solid piece of ivory, yellowed with unknown age. The curved, long nailed fingers clasped the stem of a delicately carved flower. It was a horrible object. It looked like a dead hand.

I could not repress my excitement as Lawrence locked the door and bade me bring him the box from a divan where he had placed it. I was surprised to see that his face was white and strained and that his hands trembled as he took the box from my grasp. He placed it on the table, and we took up our station near the door, both looking eagerly at the table. The air seemed heavy with some strong perfume, but that was undoubtedly the result of the long closed room with its sandalwood furniture and scented hangings.

Suddenly the table seemed to sway slightly and the hand toppled over, striking the box, and then Lawrence sprang back, with a hoarse shout, as the curved fingers loosened their hold on the flower and twined around and clung to the box. Gropingly they crawled over the carved flowers and birds; then, as we gazed breathlessly, a faint vapor curled around the edges of the box. It grew in volume, and I heard Lawrence unlock the door behind us. Then the lid raised. At first I could not see the object that protruded itself. Then its horrible form grew on my sight. The long, sinuous body of a serpent as large around as my arm issued from that tiny casket. Its red fangs were like crimson stains on the milky whiteness of its skin. It raised itself far above the table, the hideous head swaying to and fro, its green eyes gleaming like jewels in the semidarkness of the room and piercing the faint vapor that surrounded it. The incense seemed overpowering, and I felt that I was losing consciousness when Lawrence raised a revolver.

My hand was on the knob when he fired. A crimson stream flowed from the hideous thing, but still it raised its length into the air. Lawrence fired again and yelled for me to open the door. As I did so I heard a strangled cry and turned to see Lawrence falling to the floor, the white serpent coiled tightly around his body. Grasping a Turkish scimitar that hung on the wall beside me and mad with rage and grief, I thrust the gleaming knife again and again into the sinuous body of the reptile, which never relaxed its hold, its head still uplifted, with red fanged mouth and jeweled eyes. Suddenly everything turned black before me, and I lost consciousness. When I regained my senses the light was still burning dimly. The window draperies were stirring softly, and to my joy, I heard Lawrence's voice calling in strained, unnatural tones. He was slowly struggling to his feet, and I arose and went to his assistance. His face was ghastly, and around his throat, above his low collar, was a dull purple line. He pointed to the floor as he sank feebly into a chair. The white serpent was gone, but on the dark rug lay a long chain composed of countless small disks of ivory strung together on a silken cord. The scimitar lay beside it, the blade spotless and shining. The air was still heavy with a strange, subtle perfume that clouded our senses and rendered the occurrences of the past hour unreal. On the table lay the ivory box empty. The hand of Buddha was gone. Near the open window and in the shadows of the stirring draperies lay a green silk cap in the middle of which was sewed a curious jeweled button, insignia of a mandarin's rank. As I leaned over to pick it up a yellow hand with curving, clawlike nails darted across the low sill and then disappeared into the outer shadows bearing the green cap.

Lawrence lived a week, and before he died he told me the story of Van Ping, and then I knew that the punishment that had been meted out to my friend was well deserved, and I could not avenge him because of that other one who had been justly avenged.

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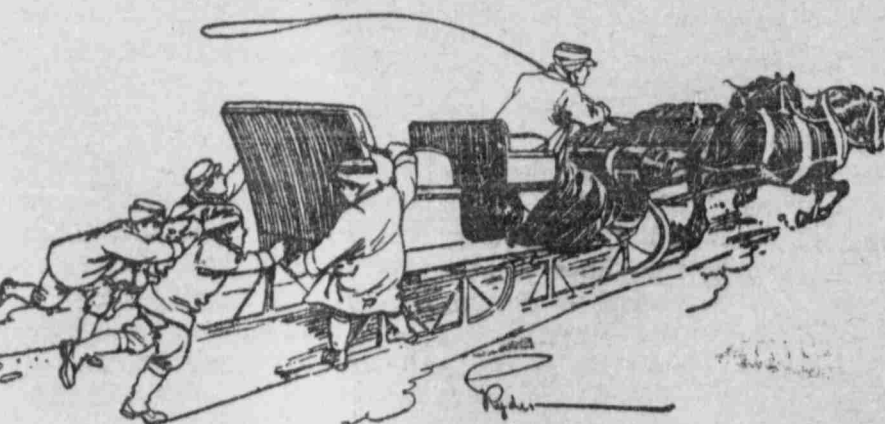
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